

# The Price of Respectable Equality: Eschatological Memories of Actually Existing Democracy

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I ENGAGE TWO CONVERSATIONS: ONE ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN history and ethics, and another about the relationship of Christianity and democracy in the United States. In the first half of the essay I suggest two shifts in the ways ethicists engage history. I argue that ethicists should be concerned not only with ideas, but also with lived religion. I then propose “eschatological memory” as a genre for using historical studies for normative work. I develop it through contrast with MacIntyre’s notion of tradition and through conversation with Benjamin’s philosophy of history. In the second half of the paper I offer a long *exemplum*, an eschatological memory of the equality promised by Oberlin College. I recall the suppressed memory of a lynching, a memory that reveals the antinomies of equality and gives rise to a politics of piecemeal reform in the light of eschatological hope.

In this essay I consider two contested relationships: between historical studies and ethics, and between Christianity and democracy in the United States. For the sake of clarity I privilege one of these conversations, and I take up questions about history and ethics more directly. But questions of democracy and Christianity are always also present, and often on the surface. I trust interested readers to look for them. I consider these questions using two different modes of discourse: showing and telling. The essay begins with some telling, a quick sketch of an argument calling for Christian ethicists to tell histories as eschatological memories of lived religion. But the bulk of the essay engages in showing. I remember the suppressed story of a lynching at Oberlin, a story of ferocious violence around the establishment of the nation’s first college deliberately to integrate its classrooms with both men and women and blacks and whites. The story shows some of the antinomies of equality as it actually exists in the United States. I work from the story to suggest a politics of piecemeal repair that looks to a horizon of Christian hope. I mean this whole second half to be a showing, an *exemplum* of the style of doing history I try to tell about. And I mean for it to be a work of theological cultural criticism. I offer it as an

eschatological memory of one important piece of the lived reality of democracy in America.

### **Telling: History, Ethics, and Eschatological Memories of Lived Religion**

We members of the Society of Christian Ethics seem to operate with a tacit agreement that there are some kinds of historical studies that are relevant for ethics, and some kinds of historical studies that are “just history.” We know what belongs in an ethics journal and what belongs in a history journal. A study of clothing and the performance of gender in nineteenth-century revivals in Kentucky? That’s history. But a study of Augustine’s views on gender roles? That could be ethics, as long as there isn’t too much “context.” Catholic women’s penitential practices in the urban South in the 1950s? History. Either Niebuhr on sin and forgiveness, from the same decade? Ethics. We know the difference. But how do we know? Oddly enough, when something happened is irrelevant for whether or not we count it as “just history.” A study of Norman Vincent Peale’s beliefs about self-transformation is history, even if it happened just fifty years ago. But a study of Aquinas on virtue is clearly ethics, even if Aquinas wrote more than seven centuries ago. It isn’t time that makes the past the past. So what is it?

Ronald Green defined the latent standards for sorting history from ethics as well as anyone. Reflecting on the first twenty years of the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Green argued that the *Journal* rightly limited the historical material it printed to “conceptually-oriented historical studies, including careful analyses of topics of abiding interest and the contributions of classical figures who continue to shape contemporary thinking.”<sup>1</sup> Green offered a perfect description of the prevailing norms for historical studies among ethicists: When we do history at all, we tend to tell histories of the ideas of canonical thinkers about topics that still concern us.

When an ethicist writes about historical materials that satisfy these criteria, conventions of style and genre smooth the transitions between historical description and ethical prescription. The historical or literary present lets us write about certain kinds of history in the present—the same tense in which we write modern moral philosophy. But the convention of historical present extends only to certain kinds of historical materials. We might write, for instance, “For Jonathan Edwards, the nature of true virtue involves consent to being in general.” But we would never say, “When Edwards preaches, he looks at a point above the congregation’s heads.” Concepts are eternally present, but practices have a shelf life. So, too, we would not say, “People in Edwards’ congregation in Northampton believe that the nature of true virtue involves consent to being

in general.” Edwards believes, but the people in the pews *believed*. He’s present, they’re past. He’s ethics, they’re history. Conventions like the historical present close the gap between history and ethics. But they work best when a writer follows the criteria Green named: “conceptually oriented” work about “topics of abiding interest” as discussed in “classical figures who continue to shape contemporary thinking.”

I do not mean to undermine that kind of work. I believe it has been and will continue to be part of most of the very best work in our field. But I do want to challenge the power of these criteria to define the field. First, I want to question the exclusive emphasis on “conceptually oriented” studies. Why should ethicists be interested only—or even primarily—in concepts? Second, I want to question the exclusive emphasis on figures and topics that have enduring influence. Why should the only interesting people and topics be the ones that managed to leave a legacy? This emphasis on continuity leads ethicists to tell histories that make connections between past, present, and some time of fulfillment. And so we do most of our historical work in narrative, the genre of connection and continuity. But why should historical work in ethics be limited to narratives about the rise or fall of particular ideas?

In this essay I try to expand the kinds of historical subjects that might be considered fit for ethics, and to expand the acceptable genres for relating historical facts to ethical norms and theological hopes. More specifically: I want to expand what we study to include *lived religion*, and the genres for relating past, present, and the time of hope to make room for the discontinuities of *eschatological memory*.

### *Lived Religion*

A focus on “lived religion” would expand the scope of historical studies beyond texts that present the ideas of canonical authors. Robert Orsi defined “lived religion” in a way that made it much more than a gathering of the presumed opposites of text, idea, and canon. He advocated use of the phrase precisely because it avoided polarities of text vs. performance, ideal vs. material, and high versus popular culture. It included all of this, and more: manners, mores, ideas, institutions, architecture, music, dress, sermons, posters, postures—all the dimensions of ethical life, and not just as “context,” but as the very stuff of *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>2</sup>

Ethicists of many stripes have good reasons to turn to lived religion. Scholars committed to democracy might assume that nonelites live ethical lives worth thinking about. Jeffrey Stout made a case for this in *Democracy and Tradition*, arguing that “The ethical inheritance of American democracy consists, first of all, in a way of thinking and talking about ethical topics that is implicit in the behavior of ordinary people. Second, it also consists in the activity of intellectuals who attempt to make sense of that way of thinking and talking from a reflective,

critical point of view.” Stout’s close readings of writers like Emerson and Baldwin gave us this second level, but left the first open for future studies.<sup>3</sup> Like democrats, religious ethicists who identify as liberationist also have reasons to turn to lived religion. Liberationists have a stake in expanding not only the canon of thinkers but also our sense of the modes of meaningful discourse. Scholars like Joan Martin and Dwight Hopkins have already taken this work up. Liberationists might find surprising common ground with more ecclesially focused ethicists around a turn to lived religion. Christian ethicists committed to the idea that the church is the body of Christ should be interested in every conceivable aspect of church life. Ecclesial ethicists should consider not only the doctrines of powerful figures and not only the rubrics that guide official performance, but also the practices and sensibilities of actual existing Christian people. A wide variety of commitments, then, might lead us to consider lived religion in our work in ethics.

All of us who work in ethics should feel compelled by the turn in the guild of historical studies not just to “social history,” but also to histories of material culture, performance, dress, practice, space, sounds, and more. Histories of ideas still matter very much, but even their most fervent advocates would acknowledge that they are only part of the story.<sup>4</sup> A significant shift has occurred within the guild of historical studies. To suggest that ethicists should follow the lead of historians in turning to lived religion is not to collapse the distinction between historical studies and ethics. It is rather to recognize that distinction, and to respect the specialized knowledge it makes possible, even as we respect the standards of the scientific guilds with which we engage. Ethicists might argue against that shift, but we cannot ignore it. It is at least the case that the burden of proof has shifted to those who count as relevant only those historical studies that consider the ideas of canonical figures.

### *Eschatological Memories*

I want to propose an expansion not only of what counts as relevant history for ethicists, but also of the ways in which we work with whatever histories we have. There are many good proposals already in the mix. Jennifer Herdt traced the interrelationships between Richard Rorty’s genres of *Geistesgeschichte*, historical reconstruction, and the rational reconstruction that remains dominant. Jean Porter argued rightly for a pedagogical use of historical studies. Melissa Snarr gave a compelling example of “intellectual history as discursive activism.” All of these proposals have real merit, and I believe that all of them should be pursued. I simply want to add another genre—eschatological memory. In the paragraphs below I try to develop a sketch of that genre through contrast with Alasdair MacIntyre’s notions of narrative and tradition.<sup>5</sup>

MacIntyre has done as much as anyone to rekindle the interest of ethicists in history, and his own historical studies have been important. He organized the

most influential of those studies by two related devices—the narrative of decline that provided the spine of *After Virtue*, and the concept of tradition that provided the structure and substance of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* The narrative of *After Virtue* was, MacIntyre wrote, “what Hegel called philosophical history.” Told from the vantage point of a normatively charged end, it brought a disparate mass of data into a moral order. MacIntyre scoffed at the idea of an “evaluatively neutral chronicle,” and told instead a narrative of “decline and fall.” The narrative related the historical past not only to the present, but also to a norm: the story drove toward the present as a time of ruins.<sup>6</sup>

MacIntyre’s concept of tradition, hinted at in *After Virtue* but developed more fully in *Whose Justice?*, followed the same template of an Hegelian philosophical history. This time, though, the narrative was *progressive*. “A tradition,” MacIntyre famously wrote, “is an argument extended through time. . . .” And for MacIntyre a tradition extended through time in a very particular way. A well-ordered tradition proceeded as people initially submitted to established standards, found problems that the keepers of those standards would recognize as problems, and then offered solutions that the masters of the guild would recognize as solutions. A tradition therefore connected past and present—and fact and norm—through the social, historical process of justification. That process made possible refinements of commitments and resolutions of debates. As MacIntyre wrote again and again, the problem with “modern” patterns of justification was that they ended in interminable debate. They never went anywhere, except by violence or seduction. A tradition, on the other hand, could make progress.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative of decline and the tradition of progress were two sides of the same coin. Both followed Hegel in linking together past, present, and norm. MacIntyre’s narrative and tradition differed in important ways from Hegel’s philosophical history. MacIntyre did not presume to tell his philosophical histories from the end of history, as Hegel did. *Whose Justice?*, in particular, located its author at a position that claimed to be nothing more (but nothing less) than the best position so far. The end from which he told the story of justification stood open to further revision in a way that Hegel’s did not. *Whose Justice?* also differed from Hegel in acknowledging the presence and persistence—for now—of multiple, contending traditions. Provisional and plural, MacIntyre’s traditions escaped some of the vices of Hegel’s philosophical history.

But MacIntyre’s sense of narrative and tradition retained Hegel’s deep empathy with the victors of history.<sup>8</sup> Knowledge began, in tradition-constituted inquiry, with submission to the prevailing standards. More than this, the “losers” of the struggles over justification that constituted a tradition faced two choices: assimilation or expulsion. Either they submitted to the triumphant point of view and made it their own, or they left the tradition and became irrational (or, at best, differently rational and so incomprehensible). One way or another, the tradition’s narrative of progress made them disappear.

Again, many different sets of commitments might give ethicists reasons to reject this narrative form. Feminists, womanists, and other scholars committed to hearing voices that have not prevailed historically should be troubled by tradition's power to make the losers disappear. So should democrats who sniff out the totalitarian tendencies. And so should Christians committed to a theology of the cross in which the resurrection of Jesus does not "justify" his crucifixion, does not sweep the breaking of the Word made flesh into a triumphal narrative of redemption in which the cross dissolves into a happy ending. Christians committed to repetitions of the liturgies for both Good Friday and Easter Sunday have reasons to reject a narrative of progress in favor of a genre that can hold tragedy and redemption together.

Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* did not reject MacIntyre's definition of tradition, but rather refunctioned it in at least three ways. First, Stout insisted on a distinction between justification and truth that accentuated the provisional quality of MacIntyre's work and moved Stout still further from any claims to be writing from *The End of The Story*. Second, Stout defined a tradition simply as "an enduring discursive practice." He refused to require the kind of internal structure that turned MacIntyre's traditions into narratives of progress. The model of discursive redemption that Stout borrowed from Robert Brandom should produce vignettes of localized problem solving, not epic narratives of progress. Finally, the form of the book fit Stout's sense of tradition. He did not arrange his studies of Emerson, Dewey, Baldwin, and Ellison into a narrative of development. He demonstrated continuity over time, but he did not tell a story of progress. As such, the differences between the figures could endure, and the studies could invite rather than suppress supplementation.<sup>9</sup> With these three shifts Stout developed a sense of tradition that did not commit him to the kind of progress MacIntyre assumed.

Seeing the ways Stout transformed MacIntyre's understanding of tradition raises the question of why he used language of tradition at all. What is gained by calling an "enduring discursive practice" a "tradition"? The language served Stout well in *Democracy and Tradition*, for it helped him to argue against advocates of tradition and advocates of democracy who saw one other as anathema. But I would suggest that the rest of Stout's argument could proceed with something like Brandon's notion of enduring discursive practice and without the kind of progress implied in MacIntyre's notion of tradition. At the very least, we might conclude that there remains room for genres other than tradition in which religious ethicists might take up history.

The genre I call eschatological memory begins in remembering that which a dominant narrative of progress suppresses in order to make sense. It remembers the loser of the contest for justification, the stray detail that does not fit the moral of the story, the stage devoured in *Aufhebung*, the person who must be banished for community to be established, the positively hieroglyphic passages

of Walter Benjamin that must be ignored in order to use his thought for a journal article. In Benjamin's phrase, eschatological memory "brushes history against the grain."<sup>10</sup> It begins by exhuming a body that has been properly buried.

Such exhumation unleashes at least three processes. First, it unleashes a process of mortification. In finding a moment that had been superseded in a narrative of progress and remembering that moment for its own sake, eschatological memory "blasts" it from that narrative. That blasting shatters the narrative—and calls into question the end toward which it runs and the meaningfulness of the suffering that it claims to justify.<sup>11</sup> Thus Benjamin could write that, "Criticism means the mortification of the works . . . not then—as the romantics have it—awakening of the consciousness in living works, but the settlement of knowledge of dead ones."<sup>12</sup>

The exhumed body creates a kind of imperative: never again. And so it calls for a second process, a politics of piecemeal repair. The remembered body demands actions that prevent its reassimilation to the narrative that justified its death. It also demands actions that resist the narrative's desire to reestablish closure, to regain legitimacy, by making other corpses. The memory of suffering as suffering, unredeemed by narrative, sparks political action. As Benjamin wrote in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," revolutionary action is "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors better than that of liberated grandchildren."<sup>13</sup>

While Benjamin saw the implications of past fact for present action, he refused the temptation to smudge away the cleft that separated present from the past. He resisted the commemorations that swept across Europe in the wake of World War I, the ceremonies that sought to "save" the dead by spinning narratives that gave meaning to their suffering (narratives not unlike the ones we hear now, from a president who argues that we should stay the course in Iraq to win a victory that will make the loss of life so far something other than a catastrophe). Against such mythological narratives—for that is what attempts to repeat history become—Benjamin insisted that the dead were dead. Past suffering remained past, and neither Hegelian history nor MacIntyrean narrative could undo the catastrophe of that suffering. Even a successful politics of "never again" could not achieve the ends of "never happened" or "never mind." Redemption was not the work of human hands. Ours should rather be a politics of piecemeal repair.<sup>14</sup>

The body exhumed by criticism and left unburied by politics became for Benjamin something like a negative icon of hope, a prayer for redemption beyond anything continuous with past suffering and present politics. It therefore touched off a third process, a movement of eschatological hope. Benjamin saw a world in travail, a world like the one in which Abel's blood cried from the ground (Gen. 4:10), in which all creation groaned with the labor pains of new creation (Rom. 8:22). That travail gave the content of hope. The content of

hope emerged through what Benjamin's friend Theodor Adorno called "determinate negation." The exhumed body taught us what to hope for: the healing of its particular wounds. But it did not give grounds for hope. Benjamin struggled all his life with various ways to describe the grounds of his hope, if any. He tried on Romantic theories of language, Kabbalah, a mystical Marxism, and more.<sup>15</sup> It is not at all clear that any of these "worked." But searching for grounds of hope, for justification in the epistemic sense, may be a false trail in understanding Benjamin. The body did not give grounds for hope, but it did give an imperative for hope. It made impossible a life of giving up, giving in, and getting with the program. Thus the "justification" for Benjamin's hope was not so much epistemological as ethical. That made it no less powerful. It let him write that "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled with the presence of the Now [*Jetztzeit*]." <sup>16</sup> Eschatological memories that have learned from Benjamin therefore refuse to see history as one damn thing after another. They refuse to see even a world of ruins as God-forsaken. As the exhumed body demands a politics of piecemeal repair, it also demands an eschatological hope.

The hope of eschatological memory refuses the consolations of teleology. Past suffering and ultimate hope are not linked by a smooth, continuous narrative that moves, however dialectically, toward redemption. Rather, in Benjamin's phrase, "every second of time was the straight gate through which the Messiah might enter."<sup>17</sup> The hope of eschatological memory takes the form not of narrative, but of constellation, a relationship between distinct moments of past, present, and the now-time of the Eschaton. Such a constellation does not assimilate past suffering to itself. It does not make any moment disappear. It rather preserves the otherness—the bodiliness—of the body, even in redemption. And so it promises not a spiritual reconciliation of all in all, but a resurrection of the body.

### **Showing: Horace Norton and Coeducation at Oberlin**

In the following section I hope to tell a short *exemplum*, a sermon story that shows what I mean by an eschatological memory of lived religion and begins to suggest the value of the genre. I also hope to contribute to debates about democracy in the United States, by remembering a broken promise of universal equality and tracing the politics and hope that flow from it.

#### ***Formal Equality and Middle-Class Respectability***

In the wilds of Ohio in 1833 a group of evangelicals used money from revived sisters and brothers in New York and New England to found the Oberlin Col-



legiate Institute. The new college pushed the bounds of equality further than any U.S. institution had before. It accepted as students both men and women, both whites and African Americans. Other colleges had already been founded to educate each of these groups separately but Oberlin was the first in the United States to try to educate them together. Here black and white women and men shared classrooms, libraries, and other public spaces. Oberlin was founded and led by revival leaders such as Charles Grandison Finney, and they built it on the kind of equality that lived at the heart of the revival gospel. In place of Old School Calvinism's belief that some were elected and some were not, the revivalists preached that "whosoever will" could be saved. God was no respecter of persons, they preached. There were no distinctions. All had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And God offered salvation in Jesus Christ—and education at Oberlin—to all without distinction. One way to tell the story of Oberlin, then, would be to see it as an important stage in the development of a tradition of equality. Historian Nancy Hardesty frames it in just this way.<sup>18</sup>

But placing Oberlin within a narrative about progress toward equality forgets all that women gave up in order to be there. Compared with other colleges, Oberlin looked like a radically egalitarian experiment. But Oberlin was heir not only to traditions in American higher education, but also to traditions of revival that extended back to the camp meetings of the last years of the 18th century. Women and girls exhorted the crowds at every early camp meeting in Kentucky, and continued to do so as the practice spread north into New York. Women also led and addressed more permanent gatherings: communities formed around Mother Ann Lee at Sodus Bay and New Lebanon, New York; Jemima Wilkinson, the Universal Friend, led communities first at Dresden, on Seneca Lake, and then at Jerusalem, on Keuka Lake. Women also spoke in public meetings of more established denominations in the region. Antoinette Brown, for instance, had been preaching and testifying in and out of churches since she was nine years old. Only when she went to Oberlin did she lose the chance to speak in public places to mixed assemblies of men and women.<sup>19</sup>

Oberlin's curious combination of rights and restrictions for women fit closely with emerging canons of middle-class respectability. Respectable women acted in carefully limited ways in official public spaces like the main assembly hall of a church, a theatre, or an association of mechanics. New patterns of open and egalitarian seating stressed the equality of women as listeners in public places like classrooms and churches. But the norms of respectability did not extend that equality to speaking. Respectable women kept silent in official public spaces. They had much greater latitude, however, in alternative, seemingly "private" public spaces, including homes or small group meetings, especially if only women were present. Gendered norms shaped not only the spaces but also the styles of respectable practices. Respectable women were encouraged to cultivate their natural gifts for empathy, benevolence, and refined feelings. Prayer and

personal testimony drew upon those gifts in a way that preaching and public oratory did not. Nothing could be more respectable than encouraging women to pray and “speak from the heart” to other women in places that were not marked as official public spaces. And women at Oberlin were encouraged in this kind of speech, and in full equality as listeners, even as they were prevented from speaking in public. Oberlin’s curious combination of equality and inequality fit closely with the emerging ideals of respectability.<sup>20</sup>

Nathan Hatch and other historians have read evidence like this and tried to frame Finney—and so Oberlin—as a “transitional” moment in which Christianity in the United States traded its birthright of radical equality for a mess of the potage of respectability.<sup>21</sup> But the shift from transgressive public speaking by women exhorters to equal status for women as members of an official public audience cannot be told as the simple story of a decline from equality to respectability. Oberlin did not give up on equality to attain respectability. It promised a new kind of equality that depended on and made possible this new kind of respectability.

Equality did not disappear, but changed. Coeducation at Oberlin offered a kind of equality not available to female exhorters who had to legitimate their speech through a claim to possession by the Holy Spirit. At Oberlin women could claim equality simply as members of the general class of humanity. “Women’s rights,” Oberlin graduate Theodore Weld argued in a reflection of the prevailing view at the school, could be derived from the broader category of “human rights.” And unlike claims to inspiration at a camp meeting, the claims to equality based on membership in the broader category of humanity did not require proof at Oberlin—such membership, like the offer of salvation in general atonement, was axiomatic. And the equality Oberlin offered its women students did not come and go, like immediate inspiration, but endured as a rule of the community. A different kind of equality, limited in some ways but expanded in others, found incarnation in the practice of coeducation at Oberlin. If women gave up the *transgressive equality* of ecstatic exhortation, the equality that came with crossing boundaries, they gained a new *formal equality* that guaranteed them certain human rights.<sup>22</sup>

Hatch’s narrative of decline missed the real gains of formal equality. In suggesting a trade-off between equality and respectability, it also missed the deep alliance of formal equality and middle-class respectability. Respectability helped to define and legitimate formal equality, even as formal equality itself became a marker of respectability. The fashionably respectable churches of New York City featured equal seating of men and women. And families aspiring to respectability sought a formally equal education for their daughters. An emerging middle class did not trade equality for respectability, but harmonized the two in a powerful new combination. That harmony of equality and respectability, which has come to seem as natural as a parlor song, was not easy at first. Remembering

a moment of dissonance early in its development can help us understand an important form of equality as it actually exists in the United States today—and begin to imagine a better hope.

## Exhuming the Body

In May 1840, a scandal broke out at Oberlin and revealed the fragility—and the importance—of the fusion of formal equality and middle-class respectability. Horace Norton, a young white student from Ripley, Ohio, sent sexually explicit notes to at least four students in the female department: Sarah A. Bidwell, Mary L. Ingalls, Jane D. L. Isham, and a Miss Owen. Norton had been a writing master before coming to Oberlin, and he used his skills with the pen to illustrate exactly what he had in mind. He seems to have signed at least some of them “Junius,” perhaps evoking Junius Brutus Booth, the British actor who ruled the affections of the pit with his robust, athletic style. At least one of the young women turned the letters over to Alice Welch Cowles, the principal of the female department. She in turn gave them to her husband, Professor Henry Cowles, who shared them with Timothy B. Hudson, professor of Latin and Greek, and H. C. Taylor, a student in the theological school who acted as postmaster. The letters, complete with vile “pictorial efforts,” seem to have made still wider rounds among men and women, faculty and students. A quorum emerged who believed that something had to be done.<sup>23</sup>

Someone—maybe H. C. Taylor, and maybe, as would later be charged, one of the young women—wrote back to Norton in a feminine hand to arrange a tryst. Full of anticipation, the would-be Junius dragged his bedding from his boarding house to spread it under a tree out of sight of the village and the road. It was Saturday night, about ten o’clock. A young woman student—probably Maria B. Babbitt—met Norton at the appointed time and place and walked with him into the woods. Just before they reached the bedding, a group of male faculty and students ambushed Norton. In his official testimony, H. C. Taylor described an orderly process of “arrest” and “examination” in which the examiners took the judicious precaution of blindfolding and briefly covering the mouth of the arraigned. Norton’s father described a more vicious attack in which some twenty men jumped Norton from all sides, choked him, and then stuffed the “end of a large stick” into his mouth, breaking his teeth. They then shoved a stone wrapped in a handkerchief into his mouth, so that he could not speak and could barely breathe. “A rope was then applied to each extremity,” Norton’s father reported, and

his hands bound behind so tightly that the circulation of the blood was in a great measure suspended in them, he was then dragged with violence to a

barn on the opposite side of the way from Taylor's house, strung up with his back to a post, with his feet just touching the floor, a posture almost as painful as that of being suspended upon the cross.

Norton hung while his captors examined him and deliberated among themselves, his father said. The Oberlin men prayed and wept as they sought the will of God. They finally heard the call to give Norton twenty-five lashes with a cowhide whip. E. H. Fairchild, a tutor in the college and brother to James H. Fairchild, who would succeed Finney as president, did the whipping. While "it is not pretended that the whipping was not a severe one," Taylor testified, it did not break the skin at any point. Norton's father again described the event differently. Using the language of his medical profession, he charged that the blows cut "down to the cellular substance" of his son's back. And using the language of a skilled pamphleteer, he charged that his son's back "was literally cut up. The blood oozed through his clothing." Somehow Horace Norton staggered to Wellington, nine miles away.<sup>24</sup>

Attempts to keep the whole incident quiet failed, and by the fall of 1840 the college had to take some official action. The faculty debated for almost a month before issuing a complex set of resolutions. They denounced (by a narrow margin) any attempt by private individuals to inflict corporal punishment, no matter how just the cause. The "chastisement" of Norton, then, was unjustifiable. But the faculty voted to commend the actions that had led to Norton's "detection." And while the chastisement was wrong, it was an act that at least intended justice and not mere private revenge. It therefore stood on a different moral plane than the "deliberate and flagrant wickedness" of Norton. On October 8, 1840, the faculty declared the case closed. Four men had confessed to the church at Oberlin that they had participated in the lynching, and no further confessions would be solicited. None of the men would be expelled from the student body or fired from the faculty.<sup>25</sup>

Word of what came to be called "the lynching at Oberlin" spread quickly, and it outraged multiple publics for multiple reasons. The courts of Ohio did not tolerate the breach of law and order, and Norton won both criminal and civil trials. People already opposed to Oberlin found new grounds for their belief that the place was a hive of fanaticism that had to be shut down. Norton's father described how "Hundreds of men, from various parts of the country, were with difficulty restrained from proceeding to Oberlin for the purpose of destroying the place." Three hundred people from neighboring Elyria gathered together and threatened to burn the college to the ground. Opposition also spread to people otherwise supportive of Oberlin and the broader new measures cause. Revived parents sent for their children. The Presbytery of the Huron launched an investigation. New measures evangelicals across the country worried not only about the violence of the whipping but also about charges that

the vigilantes had lied to entrap the scoundrel and then initiated a whipping that extended into the Sabbath.<sup>26</sup>

Charges of Sabbath-breaking and lying paled in comparison to charges of indecent behavior by the women of the college. Greenleaf Norton, Horace's father, described Oberlin as a "labyrinth of coquettes," and questioned the respectability of the "venerable MATRONS" and the "vestal maidens . . . chaste as the icicle, that curdled by the front from purest snow, and hang on Dian's temple." If young Norton's notes were so foul, why did these "Ladies (?) of the institute" read, study, and circulate them? Why did they not burn them? Did they perhaps enjoy them? Did they not help solicit them? Did they not gather with men for "nocturnal meetings" at which they read the letters and plotted what they might do to a young man's body? The notes and the lynching simply revealed the lewd mixing already taking place at Oberlin.<sup>27</sup>

Oberlin loyalists defended the school on every count but took special pains to defend the respectability of the women and so the college. Writing for a special edition of the *Oberlin Evangelist* in 1841, Professor Taylor said that "the lady" had been used only to identify, "not to decoy," the notewriter. "She was not out of the reach of efficient protection for a single moment, and was conducted home immediately after his arrest. She knew nothing of any intended punishment." Professor Cowles argued that young Norton had not even met the women to whom he addressed the letters, but had picked their names from the school directory. "I mention these circumstances," he wrote, "partly to show how little the fact that young gentlemen and ladies attend this school together has to do with these outrages upon all virtue and decency." Professor John Morgan summed up the college's official position: "The Female Department has excited great apprehensions; but during the seven years that have passed since the Institution was founded, not only have its members been preserved from vice, but from serious indiscretion."<sup>28</sup>

The Oberlin men also defended their own respectability. They refuted all charges of Sabbath-breaking and lying and argued that the monstrous nature of the crime would elicit such a response from any decent man. In speaking around the letters they adopted a rhetoric of decency in their argumentation, refusing to sully themselves by quoting or even speaking specifically about their content. Greenleaf Norton had repeatedly demanded that the letters be made public so that all could judge the actions of the mob. "Decency forbids that the letters be published," Cowles wrote in reply, even to satisfy the demands of justice. Instead the Oberlin men rendered the letters unspeakable, able to be described only by the reactions they elicited. "Their vileness passes all description," Morgan wrote, "and has literally astounded every one who has seen them." Cowles remembered people saying, "'How unutterably vile'—'beyond anything I could ever have conceived of.' 'No wonder those young men flogged him'—'there is scarcely another community in the land where such a fellow

could have escaped with his life.” Such indirect description suggested a gulf between the Christian gentlemen of Oberlin and satyr-like “Junius.” They could not even speak of what he had done. In both the form and the substance of their arguments, then, Oberlin loyalists framed the flogging not as a revelation of indecency but as a respectable community dealing out what one writer called a “lesson in manners.”<sup>29</sup>

The arguments after the lynching help clarify just what was at stake in the lynching itself. More than the character of any individual man or woman, Horace Norton’s notes called into question the respectability of Oberlin’s style of equality. White and black women and men mixed freely in the public spaces of classrooms, the church, and the dining hall. Such mixing retained respectability because it involved the transcendence, rather than the transgression, of differences. In these spaces, at least, women and men met one another as identical, common members of the more general set of human beings. Norton’s notes violated that ideal. He acted as if gender distinctions had been transgressed, not transcended. Oberlin strained toward a new merger of respectability and equality, and Norton threatened the whole project. The depth of this threat begins to make sense of the ferocity of the lynching and of the language used after the attack to describe him. Many writers used language like that of Professor Cowles: “The occurrence developed to our view the appalling fact, that in the bosom of our peaceful community there lurked somewhere a monster of obscenity and depravity.” Norton became a demon who had to be exorcised so that the fragile union of equality and respectability cobbled together at Oberlin could survive.<sup>30</sup>

Oberlin’s defenders worked hard to turn the lynching from an embarrassment into an icon of the college’s respectability. Over time those efforts began to have success. While most of the college community condemned the deed, they came to celebrate the men who did it. Others celebrated the virtuous men of Oberlin as well. J. H. Fairchild wrote that the men from the mob “frequently receive letters from ladies in New England & other parts of the country thanking them for the deed,—And some parents have sent their daughters to O[berlin] for education who hesitated to do it before. . . .”<sup>31</sup> Finney’s view matched Fairchild’s, and his final assessment of the incident is worth quoting at length:

But what effect had the trial of the young men? And especially how did the outrageous comments and denunciations of the press, far and near have upon our school? Did it keep the young ladies and gentlemen from coming here to school? No indeed! It was found that it had produced an entirely opposite effect. It was found that people reasoned thus. They had been afraid, and much pains had been taken to make them afraid, of trusting their daughters in a school where young ladies and gentlemen recited in the same class, ate in the same boarding hall, and were in all respects associated as they were here. It

was of course regarded as an experiment, and by many as an experiment of a very questionable nature. But the result of all this bluster and opposition, especially in relation to this prosecution and the cause of it, was that people reasoned in this way: Well, if there is such a public sentiment as this at Oberlin, if an attempt to seduce one of those young ladies brings upon the offender that kind of retribution, there is the very place for our daughters. We can send them there with more safety than anywhere else. If the young men of that college will themselves give a young man such a thorough castigation who attempts any such thing, such a public sentiment must be favorable to chastity, and to the protection of our daughters when away from home. There was therefore a continual increase of our students, and especially of females; and the relative number of ladies in our college seemed to increase from year to year.<sup>32</sup>

In Finney's view the lynching secured the respectability and so the success of coeducation. Enrollment numbers back up Finney's interpretation. In 1840, the year of the lynching, 166 of 484 Oberlin students were women (26.4 percent). By 1851 the number of women students had grown to 241 of 571 (34.3 percent). The growth continued the next year, when an endowment made possible scholarships that almost doubled total enrollment, and then reached artificial highs during the Civil War. By the time of Finney's recollections, in the 1870s, the percentage of women students at Oberlin had reached a solid 43.6 percent. Parents did feel more comfortable sending their daughters to Oberlin after the lynching, in part because it proved the virtues of Oberlin's combination of equality and respectability. "Indeed," Finney said, "in the providence of God almost all the onsets that were made against us through the press, by other methods of attack, resulted in our favor."<sup>33</sup>

### *Mortification, Politics and Hope*

Once Oberlin's fusion of equality and respectability was secured, it seemed best to forget Horace Norton. Someone—probably J. H. Fairchild, Finney's successor as president and the editor of his *Memoirs*—literally cut the pages describing the Oberlin lynching out of the manuscript of his recollections. The pages remained hidden for almost a century in another part of the Oberlin archives. Whoever did the cutting knew that the whipped body of Horace Norton is a memory that must be suppressed for the survival of Oberlin's amalgamation of formal equality and middle-class respectability.

In remembering Norton I do not mean to defend his actions, nor the ways they made Oberlin an even more difficult place for women students. I do mean to use his actions to expose some of the dynamics around equality and respectability at Oberlin—dynamics that included restricting women in the name of the

very respectability that Norton violated. And in remembering the white body of Norton I do not mean to forget that the vast majority of people who have been lynched in the United States have been African American. Race mattered very much in Norton's case. The mixing of black and white students made Oberlin's respectability very fragile. And if Norton had been anything but white, the mob almost certainly would have killed him. I remember Norton not to hide the importance of race, but to expose some of the ways racialized power has legitimated itself—even under the guise of equality. I exhume Norton's body to ignite the three processes I have tried to gather together as eschatological memory: mortification, a politics of piecemeal repair, and a hope beyond hope.

Remembering Horace Norton not only reveals the depth of the alliance between formal equality and middle-class respectability, but also mortifies each of the ideals. Memories of Norton break open Oberlin's promise to offer a formal equality that extended to all people. They reveal the deep alliance of formal equality, as it actually existed, with respectability. And so they reveal formal equality's role as a marker of class and a resource for legitimating inequality. The moral worth attached to formal equality transferred to the managers and merchants who promoted it. It helped to make them not only more powerful than, but also more legitimate than other classes. (The persistence of this dynamic begins to suggest why wealthy urbanites vote against their short-term economic interests to support the ideals of formal equality, and one reason why working-class people have been more resistant to the particular kind of liberalism centered on formal equality. It also begins to explain why seemingly progressive churches have had so much difficulty attracting the dispossessed people to whom they offer formal equality.) Consciousness of this mortification is at least as old as Marx. But it is worth remembering again: The promise of formal equality is not just a step along the way to perfect equality, but also a source of legitimation for inequality.<sup>34</sup> Memories of Norton mortify Oberlin's promise not only of equality, but also of respectability. The respectability of Oberlin could not coexist with memories of the whipped and beaten body of Horace Norton. Coeducation secured by a lynching, even one undertaken with prayer and before the beginning of the Sabbath, could hardly be respectable.<sup>35</sup> When Horace Norton is remembered, the respectability promised by Oberlin's formal equality looks like little more than mob violence that has won the day, washed its hands, and dressed for church.

Memories of Norton enable better conversations about equality in the United States. They help us make distinctions, as between formal and transgressive equality, and they force us to deal with equality not merely as an abstract ideal but also as a social fact, a part of the lived religion of American democracy. They make visible the deep alliance in the United States between formal equality and middle-class respectability. And so they enable a better politics. Memories of Norton prevent a politics that seeks to extend a "tradition" of formal equality in a narrative of progress. Formal equality was insufficiently re-



alized at Oberlin—women still could not preach—but even a perfect realization of the ideals of formal equality would not resolve the deep antinomy Norton reveals. It would only heighten the power of formal equality to legitimate class difference. Middle-class respectability and formal equality may be separable in principle, but as they actually exist in the United States they will be separated only by wily and deliberate political action.

A politics that remembered Horace Norton would neither work to perfect formal equality nor lose itself in the tactics of transgressive equality, the other which formal equality sought to subsume and replace. It would rather hold open the two poles of this would-be historical dialectic, and draw from both of them for the sake of piecemeal political action. Such a politics might include black men and women taking their rightful places . . . and then speaking “out of turn.” It might involve white women acting in ways that compromised the respectability of the community . . . in order to secure more formal equality. On today’s political frontier it might look like an unresolved dialectic between ActUp and the Human Rights Campaign. It might take the form of a shamelessly sexy street dance to protest workplace discrimination. A politics that remembered Norton would not just combine formal and transgressive equalities within itself. It would also build alliances with those on the losing end of formal equality’s power to legitimate.

Even such a boisterous politics, though, would not redeem the body of Horace Norton. Unburied, Norton’s body prays for an equality that transcends the respectability of a now-eroding middle class. There is a sense in which that eschatological equality is present even now, in the deep equality of every ideology, class, person, and promise of respectability. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, just as Finney preached. There is another sense, though, in which Norton’s body prays for a new community that is present now only in hope. The content of that hope flows from what it would take to heal his particular wounds: a truly universal community of equality that did not depend on a boundary without and the annihilation of difference—and the erotics that difference makes possible—within. John Rawls gave a tentative glimpse of such a community in his call for civic friendship. Walt Whitman gave a much stronger taste in his evocations of democratic desire.<sup>36</sup> Unburied and unforgotten, Norton’s body prays for a community that knows neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free—and yet sustains the differences that give love meaning and depth, even joy.

## Notes

1. Ronald Green, “*The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 1973–1994.” *Religious Studies Review* 21, 182. Quoted in Jennifer A. Herdt, “Religious Ethics, History, and the Rise of Modern Moral Philosophy: Focus Introduction.” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 28, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 168.
2. Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 3–21.

3. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 7.
4. See, for instance, E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), "Introduction."
5. Herdt, "Religious Ethics," 182–83; Jean Porter, "Mere History: The Place of Historical Studies in Theological Ethics," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25 no. 3 (1998): 105–11; C. Melissa Snarr, "A New Discipline? Beverly Harrison and 'Malestream' Christian Ethics," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 25, no. 2 (2005): 89–91.
6. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985), 3.
7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), 12, 252. MacIntyre's definition of tradition and its progressive nature both appeared in this quote from early in the book: "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted" (12).
8. Cf. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.
9. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, see especially chapters 1 and 2 for the historical sketches and pages 3 (democracy as a tradition), 276 (the distinction between truth and justification), and 271–272 (the crucial appropriations of Brandom).
10. Benjamin, "Theses," 257.
11. *Ibid.*, 263.
12. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2003), 182.
13. Benjamin, "Theses," 260.
14. See Martin Jay, "Against Consolation: Walter Benjamin and the Refusal to Mourn," in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 221–39.
15. See the conclusion of Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).
16. Benjamin, "Theses," 261.
17. *Ibid.*, 264.
18. Nancy A. Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Revivalism and Feminism in the Time of Finney* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1991).
19. Whitney Cross, *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1956), 177, 137–78. On Antoinette Brown, see Elizabeth Cazden, *Antoinette Brown Blackwell: A Biography* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1983), 3–34.
20. On gendered norms for respectability and publicity in nineteenth-century United States, see Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility*, 127–37; Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990). Older practices of exhortation by women became respectable in a variety of ways, not just those associated with Finney and the new measures. In the 1820s, for instance, respectable young Methodist women developed a practice of passionate exhortation from their deathbeds. *The Methodist Magazine* printed a series of accounts of these exhortations in 1822, including Anonymous, "Memoir of Miss Lydia B. Leavitt, of Portsmouth, NH," *The Methodist Magazine* 5 (January and May

- 1822); Eliza Higgins, "Memoir of Miss Eliza Higgins," *The Methodist Magazine* 5 (May, July, and August 1822); S. W., "Memoir of Miss Elizabeth Hough, of Chillicothe, Ohio," *The Methodist Magazine* 5 (May 1822).
21. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 195.
  22. Weld to Sarah and Angelina Grimké, 26 August 1837, reprinted in Gilbert Hobbs Barnes and Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimké and Sarah Grimké, 1822–1844*, 2 volumes (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1965), 432–36.
  23. The precise details of nearly every aspect of the lynching at Oberlin were a subject of dispute in 1840 and remain open to dispute even now. Principal parties took considerable pains to obscure or obliterate the record of what happened. My composite narrative draws from multiple sources writing from multiple perspectives. I try to state as fact those points upon which all agreed and as probabilities those in dispute. I list particular citations only for direct quotations of a source or for claims made in only one source. I have relied on a collection of contemporary accounts found in the Oberlin College Archives, Oberlin, Ohio: Oberlin College Faculty Minutes, 28–29 July, 13 August, 18 and 24 September, 1 and 8 October, 1840, and 27 August 1850; James H. Fairchild to Mary Kellogg, 13 October 1840 and 8 February 1841, Fairchild–Kellogg Letters, 1838–41, microfilm; Greenleaf Norton to Levi Burnell, 13 August 1840, Treasurer's Office, File G. Horace Norton's father wrote his own contemporary account in Greenleaf Norton, *An Exposure of the Proceedings of the Late Mob at Oberlin, in a Letter Addressed to the Faculty of the Oberlin Collegiate Institute* (Ripley, OH: C. Edwards, 1841). Testimonies from Henry Cowles, H. C. Taylor, and Timothy Hudson all appeared in a special edition of the *Oberlin Evangelist*: "Lynching at Oberlin," *Oberlin Evangelist*, February 24, 1841. Finney's *Memoirs* (413–24), written some thirty years after the events, remains an important source. I also relied on the secondary work of Robert Samuel Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College: From Its Foundation through the Civil War*, 2 vols. (Oberlin, OH: Oberlin College, 1943), 1: 444–47.
  24. See Fairchild to Kellogg, October 13, 1840, in "Lynching at Oberlin"; Norton, *An Exposure*, 8–15.
  25. For records of the faculty's deliberation, see the Oberlin College Faculty Minutes, 18 September, 19 September, 24 September, 28 September, 1 October, and 8 October, 1840, Oberlin College Archives. Finney seems to have led the majority of seven in condemning corporal punishment by private individuals. The minority of five included President Asa Mahan, Professors Hudson and Cowles, and Tutor J. H. Fairchild.
  26. Norton won a civil judgment of \$1,500 when a court in Elyria heard the case. The Supreme Court of Ohio later reduced those damages to \$550. A separate criminal trial found Hudson and four theological students guilty of "Assault & Battery with clubs, rawhides, teeth, nails, fists, feet & ropes" and fined them \$50–\$100 each. See Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 1: 444–45.
  27. Norton, *An Exposure*, 8–10, 15. See also Greenleaf Norton to Levi Burnell, 13 August 1840, Treasurer's Office, File G, Oberlin College Archives. Norton does not directly mention the *Awful Disclosures*, but the wide distribution of the work and the striking similarity of language and allegation bear comparison. At least some of his readers would have heard the echoes, intended or not. See Maria Monk, *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* (New York: Maria Monk, 1836; reprint, Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1962).
  28. All quotes from "Lynching at Oberlin."
  29. *Ibid.*
  30. *Ibid.* Greenleaf Norton registered the ferocity of Oberlin rhetoric with surprise. "They seem to speak with a bitter and almost Demonic spirit of exultation their 'detestation with which they expel from their midst one so polluted.'" Norton to Burnell, 13 August 1840.

31. On the status of the lynching party at Oberlin, see Fairchild to Kellogg, 13 October 1840 and 27 April 1841. See also Fletcher, *A History of Oberlin College*, 1: 445–46.
32. Finney, *Memoirs*, 423.
33. *General Catalogue of Oberlin College, 1833–1908* (Oberlin, Ohio, 1909), 117–19, cited in Finney, *Memoirs*, 424, n. 460. The official Oberlin view of the lynching changed dramatically after Finney's death. In preparing Finney's *Memoirs* for publication, J. H. Fairchild directed printers to skip Finney's account of the incident, which dominates his narrative of early days at Oberlin. Later the story was literally cut out of the handwritten manuscript of the *Memoirs*. The rift between previous and subsequent sections was closed with paste and pins. The cutout sections were preserved, though. Someone labeled them and set them aside to live on like the conscience of the cleansed *Memoirs*. The restoration of this section to the text is one of the most important contributions of the Dupuis and Rosell edition. The special edition of the *Oberlin Evangelist* concerning the lynching received similar (if less dramatic) treatment. Originally bound with volume three, of which it was a part, the special edition was at some point cut out and irregularly bound at the end of volume four.
34. This analysis depends on the notion of markers of distinction developed in Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: Critique Sociale Du Jugement* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979). Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
35. On the excision of the story of the lynching, see Finney, *Memoirs*, 413, n. 414.
36. See J. M. Coetzee, "Love and Walt Whitman," *The New York Review of Books*, 52.14 (September 22, 2005).